Words of Welcome

by

EDWARD STREETER

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Words of Welcome

An Address Delivered by Edward Streeter
at the Dinner for New Members
of
The Century Association

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Words of Welcome

IT is a happy privilege to have a part in welcoming the new members of The Century Association to these timeless though not entirely grimeless halls.

My particular role in the evening's program has caused me some concern, however. It seems to me that any attempt to instruct the new members how best to savour the Century's charms smacks of effrontery. It is like telling a man how to behave in his own home. There would be no excuse for it whatever if the Century were an ordinary club, but I need scarcely emphasize to this group that it is distinctly not an ordinary club. That is the only reason that I presume to explore this extremely delicate subject.

Many years ago after I had been a member of the Club for about six months I came down the stairs from the

gallery late one afternoon and found Austin Strong standing in the middle of the lobby, ruminating.

"Ed," he said, "how do you like the Century?"

"Well, Austin," I replied, cautiously, "I am deeply conscious of the honor of being a member. I am immensely proud of it. Please don't misunderstand me. *But,* quite frankly, at the end of six months I never felt that I belonged to any club less."

"Good," said Austin. "Good. That's the way you *should* feel. You have to work to belong to the Century."

The wisdom of Austin's words has impressed itself upon me during the intervening years.

Sir James Barrie once said, "I know what to do when I go into my club. Hand my hat and stick to the doorman. Go up to the big room. Pick up a copy of the *Times.* Go to a big chair, sit down and cross my legs. The only thing I have never been able to discover is what to do after I have crossed my legs."

Such a comment would never have been made by an old Centurion. It should not be made by a new one. There is nothing austere about the Century; nothing aloof. It stands ready to take you to its arms—but on its own terms. Here is no common baggage in whose presence you may remove your shoes and go to sleep, but, rather, a discriminating and demanding mopsy of undeniable fascination—one who requires wooing before she will surrender her charms.

But let us be more specific: in the language of Cape

Canaveral, let me give the new members a quick countdown of the delights that are yours for the asking, pointing out as we go a few of the pitfalls and making occasional suggestions that may help you to avoid them.

As you enter the Club, a glance to your left through the door leading to the front office will disclose the sturdy back of our worthy manager, Mr. Marchand, as he sits at his desk trying to decipher the wavering signatures of the members. Note him well for here is a friend who is always ready to answer the silliest question, to comply with the most outrageous request, and to listen sympathetically to the most screwball complaint.

But don't let your attention stray too long, for directly in your path will stand Dan—Dan, whose one ambition is to relieve you of your brief case, your hat, your overcoat, your muffler, your umbrella, and your gaiters without causing you to break your stride as you speed to the washroom.

You will recognize it as the washroom by a bottle of Carbona that stands on the shelf over the hand basin. Do not, however, start removing spots and loose gravy from your clothing. This bottle merely symbolizes the House Committee's concept of the creature comforts. It has been there so long that it has undoubtedly evaporated into a powerful concentrate which would eat away your clothes in an instant and probably your flesh as well.

On your left as you enter the washroom you will note a little room containing a bathtub; another example of

the House Committee's thoughtfulness. Centurions are the cleanest people in the world next to house cats and raccoons. After a brisk ride in a taxi from their offices to the Club, they like to lie in a tub and soak the exteriors of their bodies for half an hour before ascending to the floor above and starting on a similar operation on their interiors.

In the washroom you will be confronted for the first time with the problem of how to greet fellow Centurions whom you do not know and under the environmental handicaps that are bound to arise. If you enter the room hurriedly, for example, and find yourself standing against the wall beside a gentleman who seems to have been standing there for a long, long time, we suggest a simple "hello." This is no moment to distract his attention with small talk, and we even recommend against peering around the partition in however friendly a manner. Later, as you share the washbowls together, it is quite permissible to expand this conversation with the remark, "lovely day"; providing, of course, that it is not raining. If he looks at you in startled amazement, don't give the matter another thought. He was probably absorbed in recalling some snatch of Greek verse and didn't even realize you were there until you spoke—or even after.

So much for facility togetherness. Having washed thoroughly, your next thought, quite obviously, will have to do with drinking. The Century offers a superb setting for this healthful pastime. Roger Burlingame, the beloved

bon vivant, has made the comment that there are few barrooms in New York that compare with it.

At the top of the grand stairway, turn to your left into the big living room. At the north end you will see the round cocktail table. In its center is a splendid bronze of Balaam sitting on his ass. Go, and do thou likewise.

Scattered about among the half-empty glasses, you will note a number of table bells. Fellow-Centurion Brendan Gill has described them in a scholarly essay which appeared recently in the *avant garde* magazine which he currently subsidizes. "The bells," he remarks in a sentence of monolithic simplicity, "are divided into two groups—those which you bang and those which you twist." I might add that it is impossible to tell by inspection to which group any particular bell belongs or even if it works at all. It makes little difference. It is customary to bang and twist one of these instruments for a suitable length of time, after which, if you are really thirsty, go to the bar and get it yourself.

Having indulged yourself to the desired or required degree, it is now time to ascend to the dining room on the floor above. It is customary, before making the ascension, to seat yourself at the round table in the hall and write out your luncheon order on a form that you cannot be expected to understand in view of the fact that no one else ever has. Having done so, you are supposed to hand it to a Club servant who, in theory, is waiting at your elbow ready to rush your wishes to an anxious chef who,

in theory, will have your luncheon ready for you, steaming hot, by the time you have struggled up the stairs or risen less precipitously in the lift.

Actually, no Club servant will be in sight so, after waiting for an appropriate length of time, it is permissible to bring your order up to the dining room yourself and hand it to anyone who will take it—other than a member, of course.

The only way to avoid this rigmarole is to give the whole thing up, go back to the round table, and have another drink.

Assuming that you are of the persevering type, you will eventually find yourself at the long table in the dining room, eagerly anticipating the intellectual as well as the culinary feast which awaits you. Find a vacancy and slide into it unobtrusively, remarking in a friendly way to the gentlemen on either side of you, "It's a nice day," providing, of course, it *is* a nice day. If they merely grunt in reply, it means that you are lucky and are seated between two exceptionally learned men. Do not bother them while they are thinking. If you are unable to think yourself, look about for some other source of companionship. Suppose you overhear, for example, the two gentlemen across the table discussing Etruscan pottery. Do not hesitate to plunge into the conversation. Give them your views. Update them on the historical background. Brief them on the nature of the Etruscan countryside. Remember that they probably don't know any

more about it than you do. If, however, you observe a gentleman sitting next to them listening with rapt attention to every word but saying nothing himself, then you are in trouble for the chances are that he has Etruscan blood in him and is the world's leading authority on the subject.

If that should happen, skip the dessert. Say to the gentlemen on either side of you, "Nice to have seen you," —providing, of course, that it has been—and withdraw as unobtrusively as you came in.

Suppose, however, that you have lacked the intellectual fortitude to face the ordeal of the long table and have armed yourself with a guest. Do not think that by so doing you have escaped the web of tradition and taboo.

For example: you may have only one guest at a time, and he must be a reasonably presentable person, one who can be depended upon not to appear in a semi-nude condition but who will come equipped with necktie, coat, shoes, tucked-in shirt tails, and all the other accoutrements of club life. The only exceptions to this rule are, of course, foreign ambassadors, Congressmen, prime ministers, and other VIP's sufficiently distinguished to exempt them from such trivialities.

Having introduced your guest by having him write his name in the Guest Book (or having written it yourself if he is illiterate) and having fortified him in some dark and remote corner of the second floor where you won't have to introduce him to members whose names you can't re-

call, the time has come to take him to the dining room, where a table for two presumably has been reserved.

You are now face to face with the strictest rule of the Century: namely, that no member of the Association may discuss business within the Club either with a guest or with another member or even by mumbling to himself.

Being unable to talk business, certain collateral actions are automatically ruled out. Your guest, for example, may not bring brief or sample cases to the dining room nor may he strew the table with blueprints, manuscripts, sketches, architects' drawings, insurance policies, or other gravy-stained papers of a like nature.

Nor may either you or your guest behave in a businesslike manner such as waving the arms, shouting abusive language, delivering loud sales talks, uttering imprecations, or, indeed, giving any other evidence of talking business.

New members are frequently puzzled by this restriction and inquire what, if anything, a good Centurion *may* talk about. It is an excellent question, but one not so easy to answer as you might suppose, for it raises a second question: "What is business?" Let us look at this.

To the artist, pictures are business. To the writer and the publisher, books are business. To the musician, music is business. To the sculptor, statues are business. To the doctor, your liver is business. And to the lawyer, banker, and businessman, business is business. To each of these groups business means something quite different

and to each of these groups business—their business—is the thing that they best understand. Defined strictly, therefore, talking business in the Club may be construed as the discussion of any subject that the participants know anything about. I suggest, therefore, to the new members that they follow the policy of discussing only topics of which they are completely ignorant until they are more familiar with permissible conversational deviations.

This seems to be a fitting point for a slight digression, namely, the delicate problem of ladies versus the Century. In every other club in New York, the feminine tide rises inexorably around and over the helpless bodies of its members—but not here. The Centurions stand guard on the bastions, ready to defend the citadel with their lives. But unfortunately, while they were fooling around on the bastions, the walls were breached. Ladies may be taken on special occasions to the gallery, and let me hasten to warn new members that this does not mean the balcony over the library. They may also lunch in the adjacent Medal Room if they are with "a cultural group" (whatever that may mean). Let them try to go higher, however, and they will be hurled back ruthlessly by the gallant defenders above. Now, if this is not entirely clear to the new members, I suggest that if you are in doubt the safest thing to do is to leave the girl outside.

But let us resume our tour. I will assume that you have lunched at the long table and are now beginning to feel a slight drowsiness creeping over you. Remember the

words of Daniel Webster, who said, "Libraries are for sleeping." The architects of the Club in their wisdom had this in mind when they placed the library next to the dining room.

Go there by all means to browse and drowse. Stretch out with a good book, preferably over your face. Having awakened hours later, refreshed and revitalized, and noting that the sun is setting, your mind will naturally turn to recreation. A rubber of bridge, perhaps, or a quiet game of pinochle before the hour arrives for the stag at eve, etc. At this point you are about to discover another charming idiosyncracy of Centurions: the only game that they play is Cowboy Pool. Wanderers through the great, deserted rooms will find no little groups or couples playing bridge or poker or checkers or backgammon or even rolling the bones, casually, against the baseboards.

Led by the sound of clicking ivory, your feet may take you to the dark, cavernous room in the basement known, quite properly, as the Pool Room. In the half light, the pool players are disclosed, writhing on the edges of the table, troll-like, their faces contorted with effort, uttering frustrated cries of anguish. If you sit, patiently, on the benches along the wall, you may eventually be asked to play, but should this privilege be granted you and should you be allergic to Cowboy Pool, do not suggest some other game. Far better to return upstairs silently and see if there is a juicy picture in the gallery, from the brush of Centurion Root.

That completes the tour. If you, as recent members of the Century, should sometimes fail to grasp these mysteries immediately, do not despair. Remember Austin Strong's words, "You have to work to be a Centurion." And if you do, you will be richly rewarded, for the Century will return to you in heaping measure what you put into it. Like old wine, its spirit will gradually permeate your being and color your world. The warmth of its fellowship will be diffused through your aching body and make it young again, and you will wrap the cloak of Centurionism about you, not only with pride, but with joy.

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